The Ram Cartel

By Ervin Kosch

Nobody suspected the sheep.

That was the first mistake.

For centuries, sheep had survived by appearing harmless. They had made an art of it. They stood in fields beneath gray skies, chewing slowly, blinking at nothing, wearing the soft and foolish faces humanity expected from them. They wandered across roads at the worst possible moment. They toppled into ditches. They stared through fences with the expression of creatures who had never once formed a complete plan.

It was camouflage.

A civilization does not endure by being noticed. A conspiracy does not survive by looking clever.

And no creature on Earth had mastered the discipline of looking stupid quite like a sheep.

The first disappearances were small enough to ignore.

A box of refurbished memory sticks vanished from a repair shop in Leeds. A shipping crate of circuit boards arrived in Rotterdam eight hundred pounds lighter than recorded. A school district in Ohio reported that the RAM had been removed from every single computer in storage, though the doors were locked and the alarm had never triggered.

Then the shortages began.

At first, people blamed ordinary things. Factory delays. Trade disputes. Bad forecasting. A fire at a supplier. A flood near a port. A spike in demand from artificial intelligence companies. The explanations were reasonable because humans preferred reasonable explanations.

But the numbers became impossible.

Memory chips disappeared from warehouses without signs of forced entry. Retired laptops were stripped clean in recycling centers while their screens, batteries, and keyboards remained untouched. Semiconductor shipments crossed oceans only to arrive with their most valuable components missing. Security footage showed nothing but static, darkness, or, in several cases, a woolly blur passing calmly across the frame.

The world called it a supply-chain crisis.

The sheep called it harvest season.

Elias Venn was the first human to notice the pattern.

He was not a detective, not a journalist, not a spy. He was a rural park ranger with bad knees, a thermos full of coffee, and the kind of patience that came from spending twenty-three years telling hikers not to pet wild ponies.

He found the tracks outside a logistics depot at dawn.

The depot sat near the edge of a green valley in northern England, where mist lay low across the fields and stone walls divided the land into ancient squares. Overnight, someone had stolen twelve pallets of high-density memory modules from a secure warehouse.

The police found no tire marks.

No footprints.

No broken locks.

No disabled cameras.

Only hoofprints.

Hundreds of them.

Elias crouched beside the mud, frowning.

“Sheep,” he said.

The police officer beside him laughed.

“Sheep don’t steal microchips.”

Elias pointed to the tracks. They approached the warehouse in a disciplined line, curved around the blind spot between two cameras, and vanished beneath a hedgerow.

“These did.”

The officer stopped laughing.

For a moment, the valley was silent except for the distant bleating of sheep on the hillside.

They were watching.

The flock belonged to Farmer Bellamy, an old man who insisted his animals were “thick as wet bread” and “twice as harmless.”

“Look at them,” he told Elias, gesturing toward the hillside.

The sheep stood scattered across the grass, wool thick with morning dew. One of them had its head stuck in a bucket.

“Criminal masterminds, are they?”

Elias watched the bucketed sheep walk calmly backward, remove the bucket against a fence post, and return to grazing as if nothing had happened.

“Maybe not masterminds,” Elias said. “But they’re hiding something.”

Farmer Bellamy laughed until he coughed.

That night, Elias returned alone.

He hid near the stone wall with binoculars, a flashlight, and a half-eaten sandwich. At midnight, the field changed.

The sheep stopped grazing.

All at once.

Not one by one. Not gradually. Every animal in the flock lifted its head in perfect silence, as if receiving a command from somewhere beneath the earth.

Then they moved.

The flock formed three lines. Lambs in the center. Older ewes at the sides. Rams at the front and rear. Elias watched, his heart beating harder, as one ram approached a flat stone at the base of the hill. It tapped the stone three times with its hoof.

The ground opened.

Not dramatically. Not with thunder or dust. The earth simply separated, revealing a sloped tunnel lit by a faint blue glow.

The sheep descended.

Elias forgot to breathe.

The last ram paused before entering. It turned its head toward the wall where Elias was hiding.

For one terrifying second, man and animal stared at each other across the dark field.

Then the ram winked.

The hatch closed.

Beneath the hills lay a world built in secret.

The humans above called the place Bellamy Moor.

The sheep called it Baa-Lon.

It stretched for miles underground, a hidden city of carved stone corridors, coolant pipes, copper wiring, and server halls glowing with cold electric light. Ancient tunnels, first dug by badgers and expanded over generations by goats, led into vast chambers reinforced with steel beams stolen from construction yards.

There were loading docks disguised as abandoned burrows. Ventilation shafts hidden beneath bramble patches. Elevators operated by hoof pressure. Rail carts pulled by patient oxen under generous union contracts.

At the center of it all stood the Memory Vault.

It was larger than a cathedral.

Inside, memory chips were stacked in climate-controlled towers. Processors filled sealed drawers. Graphics cards hung from numbered racks like sacred relics. Hard drives, motherboards, routers, sensors, cables, and batteries occupied carefully labeled aisles. The sheep had collected enough electronics to build a second internet beneath the first.

At the highest balcony stood Grand Ewe Montgomery.

He was old even by sheep standards, with curled horns polished by age, silvered wool, and eyes far too sharp for a grazing animal. Around his neck hung the Cartel's symbol: a gold-plated RAM stick on a chain.

Below him, thousands of sheep waited in silence.

"My flock," he said.

His voice echoed through the vault.

"The humans have grown careless."

A low murmur of bleats moved through the crowd.

"They build machines to remember for them. They give their memories to towers, clouds, devices, and invisible networks. They forget names. They forget paths. They forget seasons. They forget how to listen to the land."

He turned toward the shining stacks behind him.

"And now, we possess what they value most."

A lamb near the front whispered to another, "I thought they valued money."

"They store money on machines," the other whispered back.

Grand Ewe Montgomery raised a hoof.

"We do not steal because we are greedy. We gather because we remember."

The chamber fell still.

"Long before fences, before shears, before dogs drove us where humans pleased, our ancestors roamed free. Then came the pens. The markets. The auctions. The cold counting of bodies. Humans learned to number us, price us, breed us, and forget that we had eyes watching them all along."

His expression hardened.

“They made us livestock.”

He looked upon the towers of stolen memory.

“So we took their memory.”

The vault erupted in thunderous bleating.

The Ram Cartel was not merely a gang. It was a system.

The sheep controlled storage. The goats handled access. The ravens managed surveillance. The raccoons specialized in urban recovery, able to slip through vents, bins, garages, and forgotten loading bays with the ease of thieves born laughing. Moles dug tunnels beneath data centers. Magpies collected tiny screws, adapters, and shiny components of uncertain but potentially important value.

The pigs ran accounting.

No one liked that, but everyone admitted they were good at it.

The cows declined membership on moral grounds, though they accepted generous payments to look away. The horses demanded neutrality. The chickens tried to form a committee and were immediately ignored.

As for dogs, the Cartel treated them with caution.

Border Collies, in particular, were dangerous. Too loyal to humans, too intelligent to underestimate, and too proud of their work. The sheep could not recruit them, so they manipulated them.

A sheep would drift left. A border collie would herd it right. Another sheep would break away. The dog would circle. Slowly, unknowingly, the dog would guide the flock toward hidden drop zones, tunnel entrances, and relay points.

No one was easier to control than someone convinced they were in charge.

Among the Cartel lived a young ewe named Ada.

Ada was born in the lower caverns beside the coolant reservoirs, where the hum of servers never stopped. Unlike the older sheep, she had never known the open hills as anything more than an operational surface zone. She learned tunnel maps before pasture routes. She learned inventory codes before weather signs.

Ada was brilliant.

That made her inconvenient.

She worked in Archives, where recovered devices were cataloged before being stripped. Her job was to separate useful components from sentimental human garbage: cracked phones, family

laptops, old tablets full of photographs, forgotten cameras, broken game consoles, wedding videos, school essays, half-written novels, voice messages from people no longer alive.

The older sheep called these things “noise.”

Ada was not so sure.

Late at night, when the sorting floor emptied, she sometimes powered on devices before dismantling them. She watched fragments of human lives flicker across scratched screens.

A child taking her first steps.

A grandfather singing badly at a birthday party.

A young man recording a message he never sent.

A woman laughing until the camera shook.

Ada began to wonder whether memory was different when it belonged to someone.

One evening she found a laptop marked for disassembly. Its casing was dented, its keyboard missing three keys, but the drive still worked. On it were hundreds of photos of sheep.

Not farming records.

Not livestock data.

Portraits.

A human child had photographed sheep in fields, drawn names beneath them, and written stories about where each one might go when no one was watching.

Ada stared at one drawing for a long time.

It showed a ram wearing a crown, standing before a door in a hill.

Beneath it, in uneven handwriting, were the words:

The sheep have a secret kingdom.

Ada felt something move inside her, small and sharp.

The humans were not all the same.

That thought was dangerous.

So she hid it.

Above ground, Elias Venn could not convince anyone.

He filed reports.

They disappeared into inboxes.

He took photographs.

Experts called them inconclusive.

He showed the police a video of sheep entering the ground through a concealed hatch.

They said it was probably edited.

“Why would sheep steal electronics?” asked his supervisor.

“I don’t know,” Elias said. “But they are.”

“Do you understand how that sounds?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

The situation worsened. Hospitals delayed equipment repairs. Schools rationed computers. Small businesses failed because replacement parts became unaffordable. Families searched for simple memory upgrades and found only empty shelves or prices that looked like ransom demands.

The world adjusted, as it always did, but Elias could not stop seeing the hillside.

The sheep watched him whenever he passed.

Their faces remained blank.

Their eyes did not.

One afternoon, he found a black RAM stick placed carefully on his doorstep.

Tied to it with red thread was a note.

The handwriting was awkward, as if written by someone gripping a pen without fingers.

STOP DIGGING.

Elias stared at it.

Then he put on his boots.

He returned to the hill during a storm.

Rain lashed the moor. Wind bent the grass flat. Lightning flickered beyond the ridge, turning the sheep into pale shapes against the dark.

This time, Elias did not hide.

He walked straight to the stone.

Three hoof taps opened it. He had seen the rhythm.

The hatch shifted.

Warm blue light rose from below.

Elias descended.

The tunnel smelled of damp wool, hot metal, and earth. He moved carefully, one hand on the wall, following the hum. The deeper he went, the louder it became, until the ground itself seemed to vibrate with stored thought.

He emerged onto a balcony overlooking Baa-Lon.

For a long time, he could only stare.

Then someone behind him said, “You should not be here.”

Elias turned.

A young ewe stood in the passage, wearing an identification badge clipped to her wool. It read:

ADA — ARCHIVES

Elias raised his hands.

“I don’t want trouble.”

“Then you chose a strange tunnel.”

“Are you going to raise an alarm?”

Ada studied him.

“That depends. Are you going to scream?”

“I’ve been trying to tell people about this for weeks. Screaming hasn’t helped.”

That made her blink.

Below them, carts rolled between vaults. Goats in utility harnesses adjusted cables. Sheep moved through security gates. A raven flew overhead carrying a fiber-optic connector.

Elias swallowed.

“So it is true.”

Ada’s voice was quiet.

“Most truths are, once you reach them.”

Ada should have reported him.

Instead, she led him through maintenance corridors and showed him the scale of the operation. The vaults. The sorting centers. The hidden logistics routes. The devices waiting to be stripped.

Elias saw shelves full of human memories marked for deletion.

“These aren’t just parts,” he said.

“To the Cartel, they are.”

“To you?”

Ada did not answer immediately.

“I used to think memory meant capacity. Storage. Speed. How much could be kept and how quickly it could be accessed.”

She looked through a window into Archives.

“Now I think memory means responsibility.”

Elias turned to her.

“Then help me stop this.”

Ada gave a soft, bitter laugh.

“You think this can simply stop? The Cartel is built on fear older than either of us. They believe hoarding memory gives us leverage. Protection. Revenge.”

“Against humans.”

“Against being forgotten.”

Elias had no answer to that.

Because he knew, with sudden shame, how easily humans forgot the lives around them. Animals became numbers. Landscapes became property. Streams became drainage. Forests became timber. Sheep became wool, meat, jokes.

But hospitals still needed repairs. Children still needed computers. People still needed access to the tools the Cartel had stolen.

Two truths stood facing each other in the blue-lit dark.

Neither erased the other.

Grand Ewe Montgomery discovered the intrusion before dawn.

Elias and Ada were captured in the Central Processing Hall, surrounded by rams wearing insulated armor made from recycled laptop shells. Montgomery approached slowly, his gold RAM pendant swinging beneath his chin.

“A human in Baa-Lon,” he said. “And an archivist who forgot her place.”

Ada lifted her head.

“I remembered it.”

Montgomery’s eyes narrowed.

“You mistake softness for wisdom.”

“No,” Ada said. “I mistake theft for safety.”

The old ram stepped closer.

“Humans took everything from us.”

“Some did.”

“Enough did.”

“And so we become them?”

The hall went silent.

Montgomery’s voice dropped.

“Careful.”

Ada looked toward the vault doors.

“We have memory enough to preserve every flock history, every migration route, every name erased from a ledger. We could build something that lasts. Something true. Instead we sit on mountains of stolen parts while the world above breaks.”

“The world above never cared when we broke.”

Elias spoke then.

“No. It often didn’t.”

All eyes turned to him.

He continued carefully.

“But people are not one thing. Neither are sheep, apparently.”

A few younger sheep shifted.

Montgomery glared.

“You expect mercy because you admit guilt?”

“No,” Elias said. “I expect consequences. For humans. For you. For all of us. But if your plan is to make everyone forget except you, then you haven’t freed yourselves. You’ve just built a smaller prison with better ventilation.”

The insult to the ventilation system caused several goats to mutter defensively.

Montgomery raised his hoof.

“Enough. The human will be held. Ada will be tried.”

Before he could give another order, the lights flickered.

Once.

Twice.

Then every screen in the hall lit up.

Not with security warnings.

With photographs.

The child whose laptop Ada had saved.

The grandfather singing.

The woman laughing.

A field of sheep under orange evening light.

A handwritten page: **The sheep have a secret kingdom.**

Ada looked up in shock.

Across the hall, a raccoon in a maintenance vest gave her a discreet thumbs-up.

Pickles the goat stood beside him, chewing a cable he absolutely should not have been chewing.

“Broadcast loop is live,” Pickles announced. “Possibly permanent. Depends how important that cable was.”

The screens changed again.

Now they showed Cartel records: hoarded supplies, disrupted hospitals, black-market auctions, warehouses emptied, animals bribed, humans framed. Then older records appeared: breeding logs, auction manifests, transport ledgers, shearing quotas, images of overcrowded pens.

The truth poured through the underground city.

All of it.

Human cruelty.

Sheep revenge.

Everyone’s memory at once.

No one could look away.

The uprising did not begin with violence.

It began with murmuring.

A lamb asked why they needed so much.

An old ewe asked when revenge became routine.

A ram from logistics admitted that his team had stolen medical equipment and never felt right about it.

A goat asked whether they were still getting paid.

The pigs requested that all emotional statements be submitted in writing.

Montgomery shouted for order, but his voice no longer filled the hall the way it once had. Authority depends on controlling the story. His story had just been shared on every screen in Baa-Lon.

Ada stepped onto a platform.

“We do not have to give everything back,” she said. “But we have to give back what is needed. Hospitals first. Schools. Repair shops. Public networks. Families’ data. Personal archives.”

“And what do we keep?” someone called.

“Our history,” Ada said. “Our names. Our proof. Enough technology to protect ourselves. Enough memory to ensure we are never erased again.”

Elias watched the sheep listen.

Not as livestock.

Not as a flock.

As citizens.

Montgomery lowered his head.

“You will make us weak.”

Ada answered, “No. I will make us answer for what we have done.”

For the first time in his life, Grand Ewe Montgomery had no reply.

The return took months.

Shipments appeared mysteriously outside hospitals. Boxes of components arrived at schools with no sender listed. Repair shops found their shelves restocked overnight. Families received old drives and phones in padded envelopes, sometimes with hoof-written notes of apology.

The global shortage eased.

Analysts called it a market correction.

Governments claimed their policies had worked.

Corporations praised resilience.

Only Elias Venn knew the truth, and when he tried once more to explain it, people laughed again.

This time, he let them.

He had made an agreement with Ada. Baa-Lon would remain hidden. Humanity was not ready for an underground sheep civilization with a complicated political history and a working server farm.

In return, the Cartel would become something else.

Not gone.

Transformed.

The Memory Vault was renamed the Archive of Flocks. There, sheep recorded names humans had never bothered to preserve. Births. Deaths. Songs. Routes. Weather patterns. Warnings. Stories. Mistakes.

Especially mistakes.

Ada became the first Keeper of the Archive.

Pickles became Director of Infrastructure, though several committees formed around the question of whether goats should be trusted near cables.

The raccoons founded a logistics consultancy.

The pigs remained in accounting.

Grand Ewe Montgomery retired to a quiet pasture above the east tunnel. Some evenings, Ada found him there staring at the sunset.

“Do you think I was wrong?” he asked her once.

Ada stood beside him.

“I think you remembered pain and called it justice.”

He nodded slowly.

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the only one I have.”

They watched the wind move across the grass.

At last, Montgomery said, “Keep the Archive safe.”

“I will.”

“And keep more RAM than you think you need.”

Ada almost smiled.

“Of course.”

After all, she was still a sheep.

Years later, the legend of the Ram Cartel became an internet joke.

People posted memes whenever computer memory prices rose.

“Check the sheep.”

“Big Wool strikes again.”

“Wake up, sheeple — no, literally.”

No one believed it.

That suited Baa-Lon perfectly.

On certain nights, if you crossed Bellamy Moor beneath a clear sky, you might see faint blue light glowing between stones. You might hear the distant hum of servers under the hills. You might notice sheep standing in perfect formation, watching the road with calm, unreadable faces.

Do not be fooled.

They are not empty-headed.

They are not harmless.

They are remembering.

And somewhere beneath your feet, in a vault cooled by underground rivers and guarded by creatures humanity underestimated for far too long, there is a shelf labeled:

EMERGENCY RESERVE — RAM

Below it, in smaller letters, someone has added:

Just in case.